

“Why Did Jesus Have to be Baptized?”

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¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)

Our theological tradition recognizes only two rituals as true sacraments: the Lord’s Supper and baptism. The Reformers accepted them as sacraments for one reason: they are both ceremonial, spiritual moments in which Christ himself participated. Because Jesus made himself a part of these rituals, we believe that they were “instituted” by him, meaning that he specifically intended to weave these rituals into the fabric of faith and worship. In that way, they have always had special significance in the church. As Saint Augustine said in the 4th century, they are “outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace.”

I accept that fully, but I have always felt like the Lord’s Supper, or communion, was more clearly “instituted” by Christ. In the upper room, on the night before his death, Christ himself broke the bread and said “Take, eat; this is my body.” Jesus himself took a cup, gave thanks for it, and said “Drink from this cup, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”¹ We have no evidence, however, that Jesus ever baptized anyone himself. Baptism was something given to him, not something that he gave.

Which begs the question that is the title of this sermon: why did Jesus need to be baptized? John the Baptist was offering baptism as an act of repentance from sin. He offered sinful people the chance to be cleansed. But we believe that Jesus Christ was without sin. We believe he is the One who makes others clean; he has no need of cleansing himself. This question is one that people of faith have been posing for thousands of years, as long as there has been a church.

One writer in those early years actually posed an interesting theory. One ancient source suggested that Jesus was not at all interested in baptism. It claimed that Jesus even said, “How have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by John? Why would I do that?” What happened, according to this source’s hypothesis, was that Jesus’ mother Mary really wanted him to be baptized, so Jesus finally relented and did it for her. Put bluntly, Jesus got baptized just to get his momma off his back.

¹ Matthew 26:26-28.



It is, we have to say, somewhat plausible. Jesus was, in fact, a human being. And what could be more human than Jesus fussing and fuming to himself, “She’s just gonna keep bringing it up. She’s never gonna let this go.” For obvious reasons, that written source has never been seriously considered by scholars. The baptism of Jesus is attested in all four canonical gospels, and the event holds deep theological significance not only in those original texts but throughout the history of Christendom. There has to be a better reason than that Jesus did it to keep from hurting his mother’s feelings.

So why did Jesus have to be baptized? This may just be scratching the surface, but I want to offer three reasons this morning... three reasons that Jesus went out to the wilderness of Judea, descended into the Jordan River, and asked John to baptize him with water.

The first reason relates to the prophets of Israel. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all saw the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. We read one of the most significant examples just a while ago: *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*² Luke writes that, when Jesus had been baptized, as he stood praying in the waist deep water, the heavens opened *“and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”* The dove had been a symbol of God’s spirit since the earliest days of Judaism. It also was a symbol of purity, righteousness, gentleness, and peace.³ The message of this powerful symbol was, for Luke and the early church, a confirmation that Jesus was that stump of Jesse, the One from David’s line who would redeem a broken world. His baptism was the moment when the Spirit of the Lord visibly came to rest upon Jesus in a way that no one would miss – the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and faith in the Lord. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Because in that moment Jesus was anointed as the long-awaited Messiah.

Just in case someone in the crowd might miss this overt messianic sign, there was another one. *“A voice came from heaven,”* Luke writes, saying *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* In Luke’s gospel, the voice speaks to Jesus: *“You are my Son.”* In Matthew’s gospel, the voice is clearly talking to the crowd: *“This is my beloved son.”* Either way, God wasn’t taking any chances that someone might not be paying sufficient attention and miss the significance of this moment.

I once saw a cartoon that illustrates this point. The first frame is a bird prison. The imprisoned flock is standing out in the yard surrounded by a high wall. They are all wearing their striped and numbered prison garb. An armed uniformed security bird is keeping watch in a tower at the top of the wall. In the next frame, one of the prisoners flaps his wings, rises up off the ground, and easily flies over the prison wall on his way to freedom. One of the birds is pointing up, saying “Hey, look at Daryl!” As they all watch him fly away, another asks himself, “Has it always been that obvious?”

This is the second reason -- the fact that we, as human beings, are so very good at

² Isaiah 11:1-10.

³ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/3-22.htm>.

missing the point. Perhaps we are not really paying attention, or maybe we got distracted by other things, but somehow we miss something important that has been sitting right in front of our eyes the whole time. Psychologists call this phenomenon “inattention blindness” -- when an individual fails to notice something in their field of vision, often because they are focused on a task or thinking about something else. This can happen even if we are looking in the exact direction of the thing we are missing.⁴

The point is that our ability to see things clearly hinges on our attention and our expectations. On any given day, what are we paying the most attention to? What are we expecting to see? Most of us do not get up in the morning and wonder, “How will I see God today?” Instead, we are thinking about getting the kids dressed, fed, and off to school on time. We are thinking about the meetings we have that day, or the medical test results that still haven’t come in, or whether we have enough in our account to pay the credit card bill this month. We get tied up in all kinds of knots, and when we do, we can miss important signs and signals that should be obvious.

Interestingly, this idea is not only scientific; it is biblical. It is a theme that runs through the prophets and through the gospels. It is actually the reason Jesus chose to talk in parables, because he was trying to get the attention of people who were distracted, people who weren’t really looking for revelations about God or heaven or anything outside of their little frame of vision. “Seeing they do not perceive,” Jesus said. “They hear but they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

“This is exactly what the prophet Isaiah said, Jesus continued. “With these people indeed is fulfilled the prophecy... that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes.’”⁵

So the sight of the descending spirit had to be unmissable, so even people who were inattentive would see it. The voice had to boom from heaven, so that even distracted people could hear it. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Because the world needed to recognize that something big was happening. Because the world needed to know that the ministry of the Son of God was starting in earnest.

Last but certainly not least, the third reason that Jesus had to be baptized is so that Jesus could show the world what human faithfulness and obedience looks like. One of the things about the church is that we spend a lot of time pondering the divinity of Christ, but a lot less pondering the humanity of Christ. In faith, we proclaim Jesus Christ to be “fully human, fully God,”⁶ that “for us and for our salvation, [Christ] came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.”⁷ God became flesh and dwelled among us so that God could appear to us in ways we could see, speak to us in ways we could hear, touch us in ways we could feel. Christ is the greatest teacher we could ever have. Because he is fully human, he shows us how to be human in the best possible way. Because he is fully God, he shows us what God is really like.

⁴ “Inattention blindness,” <https://www.sciencedirect.com>, January 10, 2025.

⁵ Matthew 13:13-15.

⁶ A Brief Statement of Faith, §11.2.

⁷ The Nicene Creed, §1.2.

The theologian Shirley Guthrie says it this way: “If we want to know who the Holy Spirit is, we have to look first at Jesus of Nazareth.” And, if we want to know how we should live as human beings, we have to look first at Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels teach us, Guthrie writes, not just to think of Jesus as God incarnate, but “also as a human being who, at every point of his life, in everything he said and did, was filled, led, inspired, and empowered by God’s Holy Spirit.” So, if we want to know what it means to have the Holy Spirit dwell within us, we look at Jesus. He “is our prime example of what it means to be a Spirit-filled person.”⁸

That lesson began with the baptism of Jesus. It signaled the beginning of an intensive three-year course on who God is and who we are. Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Because it marked the beginning of the path to discipleship. “Follow me,” he says. Our invitation into faith is to follow him. Thus, if his ministry began with baptism, then ours must begin there as well.

All three of these reasons that Christ was baptized – to reveal and anoint him as the Messiah promised by the prophets; to grab and hold the attention of a distracted and inattentive world; and to announce that his life would reveal not only the true nature of God but also the path to that God – all of this is just the beginning of how we answer our own questions about our own baptisms. This is just the beginning of the journey that little Jack and Noah have begun today.

Why should we be baptized? Because in baptism, we proclaim our faith in Christ as Messiah and Lord. In baptism, our attention is directed to God as the source of our being and the fount of every blessing. In baptism, we turn to Christ to discover God’s true nature and our true nature.

As if that wasn’t more than enough, in our baptism we are cleansed, renewed, reborn. In our baptism, our sin dies with Christ and we are raised with Christ. In our baptism we receive the gift and power of the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts forever. In our baptism, we become God’s children. And in our baptism, an old life is over, and a new one begins.

All of these gifts are ours if we allow ourselves to see and believe what Christ offers to us – born in the water, infused with the power of the Holy Spirit, a visible sign of an invisible grace. **Amen.**

⁸ Shirly C. Guthrie, Jr. *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1994), p. 294.